

Soviet Persecution of Christians

BY JOHN ROZMITAL

THE PROPAGANDA in the U.S. press, extolling the current "peace-through-trade" detente with the Soviets has also resulted in a virtual blackout on any news about the persecution of Christians in Communist Russia.

This was to be expected. The international bankers who are engineering the current business deals don't want any interference from Americans whose moral sense might be outraged if they learned the truth.

Recent reports from European underground sources reveal that despite assurances from Soviet leaders to the contrary, Christians are being persecuted for their religious beliefs and thousands had been sent to join the millions of political prisoners in Siberian slave labor camps.

Critics say the biggest setback to religious freedom in more than a decade was suffered when President Nixon visited the Soviet Union in May, 1972. His trip and approving words perpetuated the Soviet lie that

there is religious freedom in the Communist nations.

The furore over the President's attendance at a Baptist church service raised by some conservative U.S. church leaders apparently caused the President to skip the church-going chore during his June 1974 "friendship-and-trade" tour and instead lay a few wreaths on tombs of "unknown" soldiers.

Religion in Russia, technically given freedom to exist in Article 124 of the Soviet Constitution, in practice is governed by such strict rules that much worship is practiced "underground." The Constitutional guarantee says "freedom of religious worship and freedom of antireligious propaganda is recognized for all citizens." Religious leaders cannot openly campaign for new adherents, but the Communist Party and the state actively campaign against all religions, especially against some evangelical sects that appear to challenge the state for control of people's minds and spirits.



During President Nixon's 1972 visit, newspapermen sent back the breathless report that the President found time to attend services in a Baptist church in Moscow. The news item was given considerable space by the papers—ever on the lookout for titillating bits that try to prove that what Americans believe is not necessarily so. Every newspaper editor tries to print as many of these Ripley-type "believe-it-or-not" items.

The intention of most of the articles was to show that religion is practiced openly (which Americans doubt) and by inference (and carefully worded statements from the Nixon press agents) that those who believe in God in Russia are not persecuted. (This, most Americans know, is a lie.)

This latest "religion-is-free-in-Russia" canard has followed a number of similar recent propaganda ploys.

Abernathy Gets Medal for Propaganda

For example, in October 1971, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, got considerable coverage in newspapers when he returned from the Soviet Union and announced that the Russian people have "complete religious freedom."

To "prove" this religious freedom he said that he "preached in a Russian Orthodox church to some 7,000 who filled the cathedral." He failed to mention—and few Americans are aware of the fact—that the Russian Orthodox church is the official "captive" church of the Communists and serves the same way that the Church of England served King Henry VIII in the 16th century.

According to documents circulating within the Soviet Union's dissident community, some 500 of Rev.

Abernathy's fellow Baptists have been imprisoned since 1961. Their crime, it seems, was to break away from the officially tolerated Baptist Church, and persist in giving religious teachings in the home.

Unfortunately for Mr. Abernathy's credibility standing, one of the news services carrying his praise of the Soviet Communist regime also noted the fact that during his trip through Europe he received a "peace medal" from the Communist East German Republic. Obviously, one does not bite the hand that feeds it.

Arrests and Detentions

The desire for religious freedom from a large segment of the population bothers the Soviet rulers. Arrest, detention and banishment to Siberian work colonies are used to keep down open protest:

- * Baptists in many areas have recently been accused of forcing their children to participate in religious ceremonies and haled into court.

- * In Soviet Asia, a Buddhist leader was sent to a prison camp.

- * In Lithuania, a group of Jehovah's Witnesses has been sent to prison.

- * In Siberia, members of a fundamentalist sect were accused of keeping their children away from Communist Party activities.

- * On May 18, 1972, in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas, Roman Catholic and nationalist demonstrators fought a pitched battle with Soviet police to dramatize their discontent on the eve of President Nixon's arrival.

The Kaunas demonstration was reported in some U.S. newspapers because it involved not only religious freedom, but a drive for national self-determination. Lithuania is a captive nation. It has been fighting to regain its freedom since it was

forcibly annexed to the Soviet Empire in 1940.

A massive revolt against the Communists began in 1941 at the time of the German advance against Stalin. No aid came from the United States (or England and France) because the Communists were "our friends and allies."

During the war years and until 1952, the Lithuanians fought a guerilla war. They were beaten. At the time of the Hungarian revolt in 1956, the Lithuanians rioted in Kaunas. The Kremlin response was deportation and execution of the leaders. Not long ago, two Lithuanian Catholic priests violated a ban on preparing children for their first Communion and were sentenced to three years of forced labor.

Petition to the U.N.

V. Stanley Vardys, director of the Soviet Area Studies at the University of Oklahoma and author of the book, *Lithuania Under the Soviets 1944-65*, recently wrote that the rebellion in Kaunas represents "an apex of dissatisfaction that has been accumulating since the second half of the sixties with the government's treatment of civil rights, especially freedom of religion."

Vardys writes that in the winter of 1971-72 "17,000 Lithuanians dared to sign a petition to party chief Brezhnev and to Kurt Waldheim of the United Nations in which they asked for enforcement of Soviet constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion that are now violated."

Although too many Americans had become apathetic about the losses of political and religious freedoms around the world, there were protests from a few U.S. groups about President Nixon's worship at the Russian Baptist church. One American religious leader wrote of the Baptist church service:

"We thought you knew that that was an operation of the KGB, the Soviet secret police. The man whom the press reports preached to you, Ilya Ivanov, chairman of the All-Russian Council of Evangelical Christian Baptists, has repeatedly praised the Soviet Union as fulfilling the ideals precious to Christianity."

Christians in Insane Asylums

The Rev. Richard Wurmbrand, who spent 14 years in Communist prisons, and now living in the United States, says the latest underground documents reaching the West tell a chilling story about the treatment of Russian Christians locked away in special mental institutions.

"The commonest form of punishment is the use of mental drugs. The prisoner's mouth is forcefully opened with an expander and a drug, named Aminazine, is administered. This "knocks out" a prisoner for a whole month. Many never regain their senses. Another drug, Sulfazine, tortures the prisoner with terrible cramps compelling him to sign any demanded false confession."

It seems to be the policy of the Soviet authorities to lock up the leaders of the Christian movements. Several not-so-subtle methods are used on their followers who want to participate in Christian services. For example, Communist Party vigilantes often stand outside of the few functioning churches to question those about to enter and to discourage them from entering. Churchgoers are likely to be criticized at their work places.

The Soviet government's campaign against religion has varied in intensity to suit the immediate objectives of the regime. For example, when the Soviet Union got into World War II, the Communists relaxed their anti-religious activities. Stalin needed support for the war. After the end of

the war, the anti-religious drive was resumed. But curiously, the Russian Orthodox Church gets some Soviet support. That's because it is a "kept" church. It exists as a pale shadow of its old self, serving a largely aged, and largely female, band of followers in the few old churches the state allows to function.

The Orthodox hierarchy annually pays the state a contribution of about six million rubles (\$8 million at the official Soviet exchange rate) to be used for the restoration of old churches and other national monuments and for a "peace fund."

A few priests are being trained every year but the state has the power to decide which ones will be officially registered to take up their duties. The church leaders, headed by the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, are allowed to participate in international conferences where they loyally endorse the current Kremlin political line.

U.S. Alliance with Oppressors

Some American religious leaders say that it is most discouraging that

while the thirst for religion is growing among the people (as evidenced, for example, by their eagerness with which smuggled Bibles are received from private evangelical groups), the government of the United States has sided with their atheistic oppressors.

One syndicated columnist recently wrote: "The new super-power relationship that President Nixon has established with Soviet leaders raises a chilling question of its price in terms of human freedom for millions."

He noted that what is different with the new Nixon policy is "that it is the first time an American President ever traveled to Moscow and hailed Soviet leaders as 'honorable men' while their secret police crushed opposition to Soviet control of these captive nations. Such a trip would have been unthinkable in the past."

The President may infer that the people of the Soviet Empire enjoy religious freedom, but Americans know this is a lie. There is no religious freedom in the Communist nations.

They Refuse to Pay

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planting evidence on potential victims, and they are not above trying to instigate the tax patriots to violent acts in order to be able to affect an arrest on one trumped up charge or another.

Needless to say, there is a lot of soul searching going on within various tax protest groups at the present time as to ways to ferret out and expose the IRS spies in their midst.

But the tax rebels we have met are a pretty gutty bunch and they are not about to give up their activities

under threat of imprisonment, violence or anything else.

There are so many patriotic anti-tax groups around these days that it would be impossible to chronicle them in this article, so suffice to say that every day sees new ones popping up hither and yon, in the cities and in the boondocks. (See Dr. Larson's book, *Tax Revolt USA*, for specific organizations.) It is an amazing phenomenon, especially in light of the fact that most conservative organizations for the past 25 years have been strictly eat, meet and retreat organizations that sell books to each other.